

Influenza Pandemic Q & A

1. What is influenza pandemic?

A: An influenza pandemic is a global outbreak of disease that occurs when a new influenza virus appears or “emerges” in the human population, causes serious illness, and then spreads easily from person to person worldwide. Past pandemics have led to high levels of illness, death, social disruption, and economic loss.

2. How is an influenza pandemic different from a normal influenza outbreak?

A: Seasonal outbreaks of influenza are caused by subtypes of influenza viruses that are already in existence among people, whereas pandemic outbreaks are caused by new subtypes or by subtypes that have never circulated among people or that have not circulated among people for a long time. Also, pandemics do not necessarily occur during what is considered the “normal” influenza season.

3. When will the next influenza pandemic occur?

A: It is impossible to predict when the next pandemic will occur, but many scientists believe it is only a matter of time. The last pandemic was the 1968-69 Hong Kong flu, which caused about 34,000 deaths in the United States.

4. How can an influenza pandemic be avoided?

A: It is nearly impossible to avoid another influenza pandemic. Instead, plans must be developed to be as prepared as possible when a pandemic begins.

5. Are we prepared for an influenza pandemic?

A: Plans for responding to the next influenza pandemic are being developed at the state, federal, and even international levels. These plans deal with a variety of issues to determine how to make best use of available resources to protect people from infection, to care for patients, and to limit the spread of infection as much as possible.

6. How many people could die in Indiana in an influenza pandemic?

A: The severity and death rate of any influenza pandemic is impossible to predict ahead of time.

7. Is there a vaccine available?

A: A vaccine probably would not be available in the early stages of a pandemic, or would be available in very limited amounts. When a new vaccine against an influenza virus is being developed, scientists around the world work together to select the virus strain that will offer the best protection against that virus, and then manufacturers use the selected strain to develop a vaccine. Once a potential pandemic strain of influenza virus is identified, it usually takes at least six months before a vaccine will be widely available. If a pandemic occurs, it is expected that the U.S. government will work with many partner groups to make recommendations to guide the early use of vaccine.

8. Can antiviral medications be useful during a pandemic?

A: Four influenza antiviral medications (amantadine, rimantadine, oseltamivir, and zanamivir) are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for the treatment and/or prevention of influenza. However, only oseltamivir appears to be effective against the H5N1 influenza virus strains currently circulating in Asia. Supplies of antiviral medication are likely to be limited and insufficient to meet the demand.

9. Are there enough resources available to handle an influenza pandemic?

A: An influenza pandemic would require a large-scale response, both in terms of personnel and material resources. A great deal of work is being done now to develop and plan for those resources, and to identify where and how they will be accessed.

10. What quarantine/isolation orders will be issued during an influenza pandemic?

A: The severity of the pandemic would determine if any such orders would need to be issued. However, the State Health Commissioner does have the authority to take such action if it is deemed to be necessary. Local Health Officers also have similar authority at the local level.

11. How can people protect themselves?

A: The same steps that individuals can take to protect themselves from seasonal outbreaks of influenza will also be critical during a pandemic. Those steps include frequent and thorough hand washing and various “respiratory hygiene” practices such as covering your mouth when you sneeze or cough. It will also be important for people to stay home from work or school while ill and to seek medical advice and care as needed.